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ABSTRACT

A study examined the readership of state cooperative extension offices' home learning programs--nine series of booklets of information about pregnancy, infant development, and parenting, mailed to parents in ten states to coincide with pregnancy stage and baby's age in months. The reading level of the series varied from sixth to eighth-grade level. Data were gathered using an evaluation questionnaire sent to parents as they completed the booklet series. Of the more than 51,000 parents estimated to have received the series during the study year, 2,263 returned their questionnaires. Results indicated that while respondent characteristics varied from state to state, most were 25 years old or older, white, married with some post high school education. Fifty percent lived in urban areas, and 60% were first time parents. Results also indicated that all booklet series were well read, with 84% of the respondents reporting having read all articles in all issues, and 74% reporting that someone other than themselves--usually the spouse and/or the baby's grandparents--also read the booklets. Eighty-five percent rated the writing style of the booklets as "just right," and most reported that all the major subjects included were "somewhat" or "very" helpful. Results suggest that the booklets achieved their intended purpose, and that "age-paced" home learning programs serve a useful purpose. (MTH)

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IT MATTERS IF THEY READ: EVALUATION OF TEN AGE-PACED PARENT EDUCATION HOME LEARNING PROGRAMS

Dorothea Cudaback

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IT MATTERS IF THEY READ: EVALUATION OF TEN AGE-PACED PARENT EDUCATION HOME LEARNING PROGRAMS

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October 1986

The Programs Studied

The home learning programs which are the subject of this study are series of four- to eight-page booklets of information about pregnancy, infant development and parenting. The booklets are written and distributed to parents (usually by mail) to coincide with pregnancy stage and baby's birth age in months. Parents therefore receive information exactly when they most want and need it. A survey done in 1980 showed 19 state Cooperative Extension offices were using these programs. The booklet series differ in format, length and content, but all are designed to help parents improve their ability to nurture and guide their babies.

The booklets distributed by ten of these states (Arizona, California, Delaware, Florida, Georgia, Iowa, Nevada, North Carolina, South Carolina and Washington) are the subjects of the evaluation reported here. Two of these states use the same series. Each of the nine series is quite different. Booklets range in size from one to eight pages. Two series include three prenatal issues; the rest start at baby's birth. Reading level of booklets varies from 6th grade to 8th grade. One series is illustrated with photographs, the rest with line drawings. Six of the series are typeset, four are not. All contain the same general information on baby development and care and parental concerns.

Data Gathering

Data for the study were gathered by a common evaluation questionnaire sent to parents as they completed their booklet series. A standard procedure for sending followup postcards and letters was used in all but one state to maximize questionnaire returns. In all, 2,263 usable questionnaires were returned. State returns ranged from 142 to 365 per state, an overall 58 percent return rate. The 2,263 questionnaires represent 4 percent of the total number of parents (51,370) estimated to have received the series in the ten participating states during the study year (1984).

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* This research was a team effort. The project team consisted of five state Cooperative Extension Family Life Specialists: Cindy Darden, Home Economist/Home Environment, University of Georgia; Dorothy Labensohn, Human Development and Family Life Specialist, University of Iowa; Patricia Nelson, Family and Child Development Specialist, University of Delaware; Emily Wiggins, Family Life Specialist, University of South Carolina. Nancy Dickinson, Human Relations Program Representative, University of California was in charge of data analysis. Project consultation was provided by Ronald Daly, National Program Leader Human Development/Family Relations USDA Extension Service, Milton Fujii, Administrative Analyst, University of California, and John Michael, Program Evaluator, USDA Extension Service.

The Respondents

Characteristics of respondents varied from state to state. Nationally most respondents were 25 years or older (70 percent), married (85 percent) had some post high school education--either vocational training or college (66 percent). Fifty-five percent reported a gross family income of $20,000 or more a year; 54 percent of the mothers were not employed outside the home. Eighty-six percent gave racial/ethnic identity as white, non-Hispanic. Fifty percent reported living in a rural area, 50 percent in an urban area. Sixty percent of the respondents were first time parents. Twenty-five percent had used Cooperative Extension services in the past, 75 percent had not. For more information on respondent characteristics and state response range. See attachment 1.

Reading Patterns

Apparently, all booklet series were well read. Eighty-four percent of the respondents reported reading all articles in all issues; 12 percent reported reading most items in most issues; 11 percent gave the booklets to someone else, and 66 percent kept the booklets for future reference. Of those who kept their booklets, 92 percent referred to back issues. Seventy-three percent reported someone else besides themselves read the booklets, most frequently their spouse or their baby's grandparent. Eighty-five percent of the respondents rated the writing style as just right, 12 percent as too basic, and 1 percent as too hard to understand.

Usefulness of Information

A great majority of respondents reported that all major subjects included in the series were "somewhat" or "very" helpful. "Very helpful" ratings were given for the following kinds of information: baby's emotional growth (74 percent), baby's intellectual development (72 percent), baby's health (72 percent), baby's physical growth (67 percent), fathering (47 percent), taking care of self (46 percent), parenting resources (45 percent). Sixty-one percent of the respondents rated their series overall very useful, 38 percent rated it moderately useful, and 2 percent as not useful.

Effect on Parenting Attitdues and Practices

A major purpose of all ten home learning programs was to help recipients feel more self-confident as parents, worry less about their babies, and improve their parenting practices in certain key ways. For the great majority of respondents, one or more of these goals was realized. Ninety-three percent said that reading the booklets helped them feel more self-confident as parents (33 percent "a little" more confident, 35 percent "moderately" more confident, and 25 percent "much" more confident). Fifty-one percent said that because they read the series, they worried less about their baby. Eighty-nine percent reported that because of reading the series they had adopted or increased one or more key parenting behaviors: 77 percent provided more things for their baby to feel, look at, listen to, smell and taste; 75 percent played with their baby more; 67 percent talked to their baby more; 59 percent smiled, kissed, and hugged their baby more; 43 percent responded more quickly when their baby cried. Forty-three percent said that reading the booklets helped their relationship with their baby's other parent.

Characteristics of Parents Most Influenced by the Home Learning Programs

The relationship between parent characteristics and high influence scores varied somewhat from state to state. Overall, those parents who reported that reading the series resulted in most improvement in key parenting practices, most increase in parental self-confidence and most decrease in parental worry were significantly more likely to be teenage parents, to have lower family income (under $20,000), to be unmarried, to have achieved lower education levels or to be Black. These respondents were also significantly more likely than others to rate the series as very useful. First time mothers were significantly more likely than other mothers to report that as a result of reading the series, they increased key parenting practices and worried less about their baby. These mothers were also significantly more likely than other mothers to rate the series as very useful.

In the charts on the next page, we compare program impact responses of (1) teenage and older mothers; (2) Black non-Black mothers; and (3) first time and non-first time mothers.

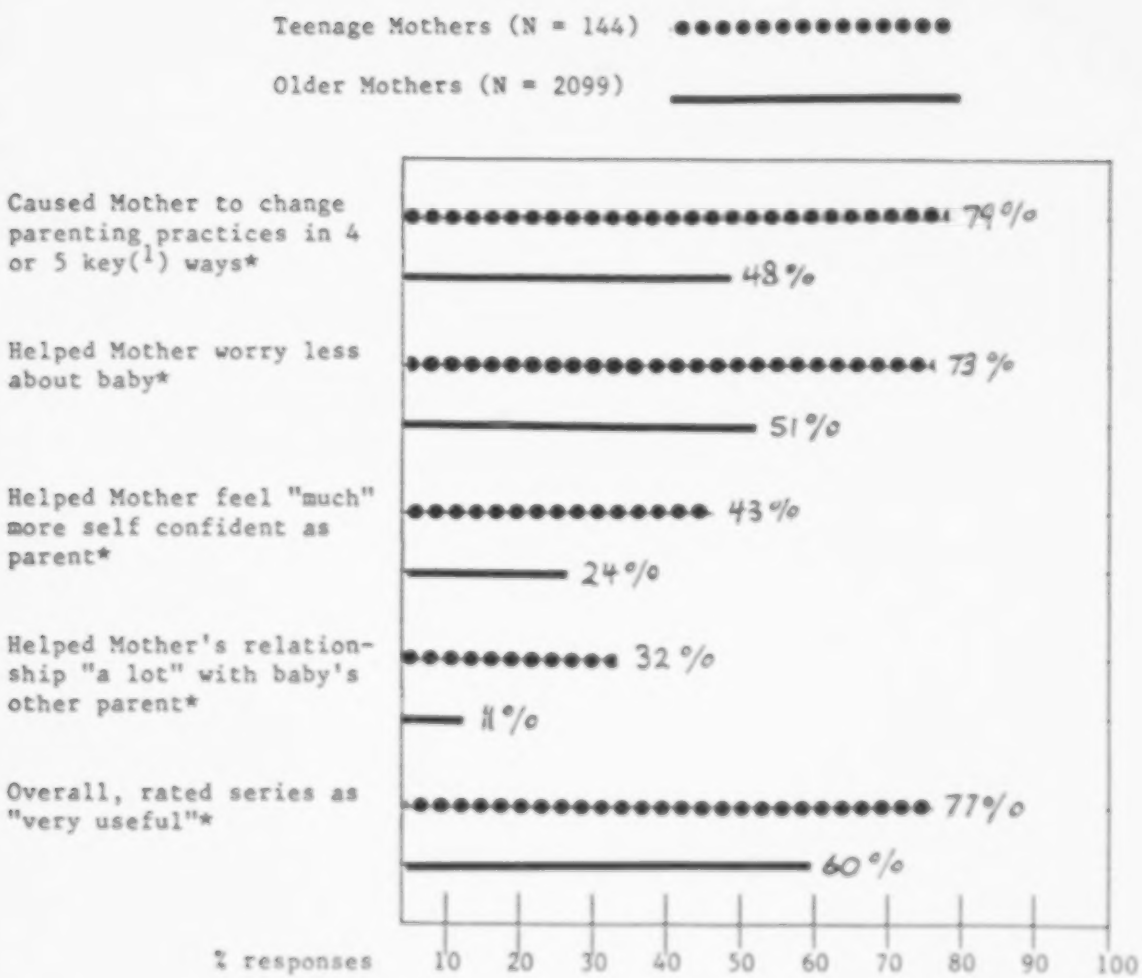
Compared to those who received the booklets three or more issues at a time, those who received the booklets monthly were significantly more likely to report improved parenting practices, increased parental confidence, and decreased parental worry as a result of reading the booklets. These parents were also significantly more likely to give the booklets high usefulness ratings, to read all or most items in all issues, and to report that someone else besides themselves read the series.

Those mothers who reported not working outside the home, compared to employed mothers, were significantly more likely to report that reading the series improved their parenting practices and decreased their parental worry. These unemployed mothers also rated the usefulness of the series more highly, were more likely to read most or all articles in all issues and to refer to back issues.

Summary

Those of us who care about serving new parents must devise cost effective ways to effectively respond to these parents' needs and desires for help. Our studies indicate that for many parents age paced home learning programs can provide this help. We in no way claim that such programs can help all parents nor that they can provide all the education and support needed by these parents. We do suggest that home learning programs deserve an important place in our spectrum of services for those who are making this stressful and crucial transition to parenthood.

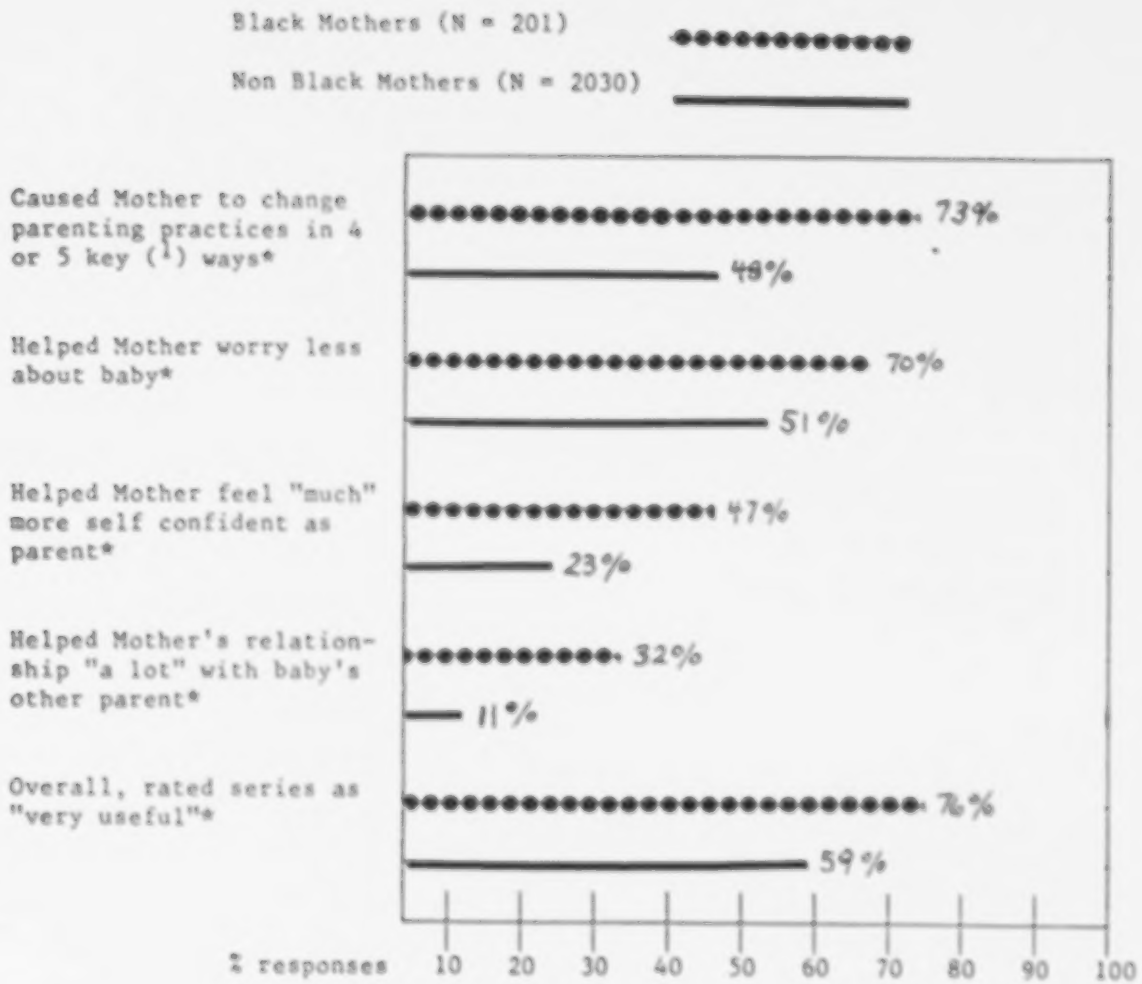
Impact of Home Learning Programs: Teenage & Older Mothers



*p < .0005.

(1) Caused me to: 1) talk to baby more; 2) smile, kiss and hug baby more; 3) play with baby more; 4) respond more quickly when baby cried; 5) provide more things for baby to feel, look at, listen to, smell and taste.

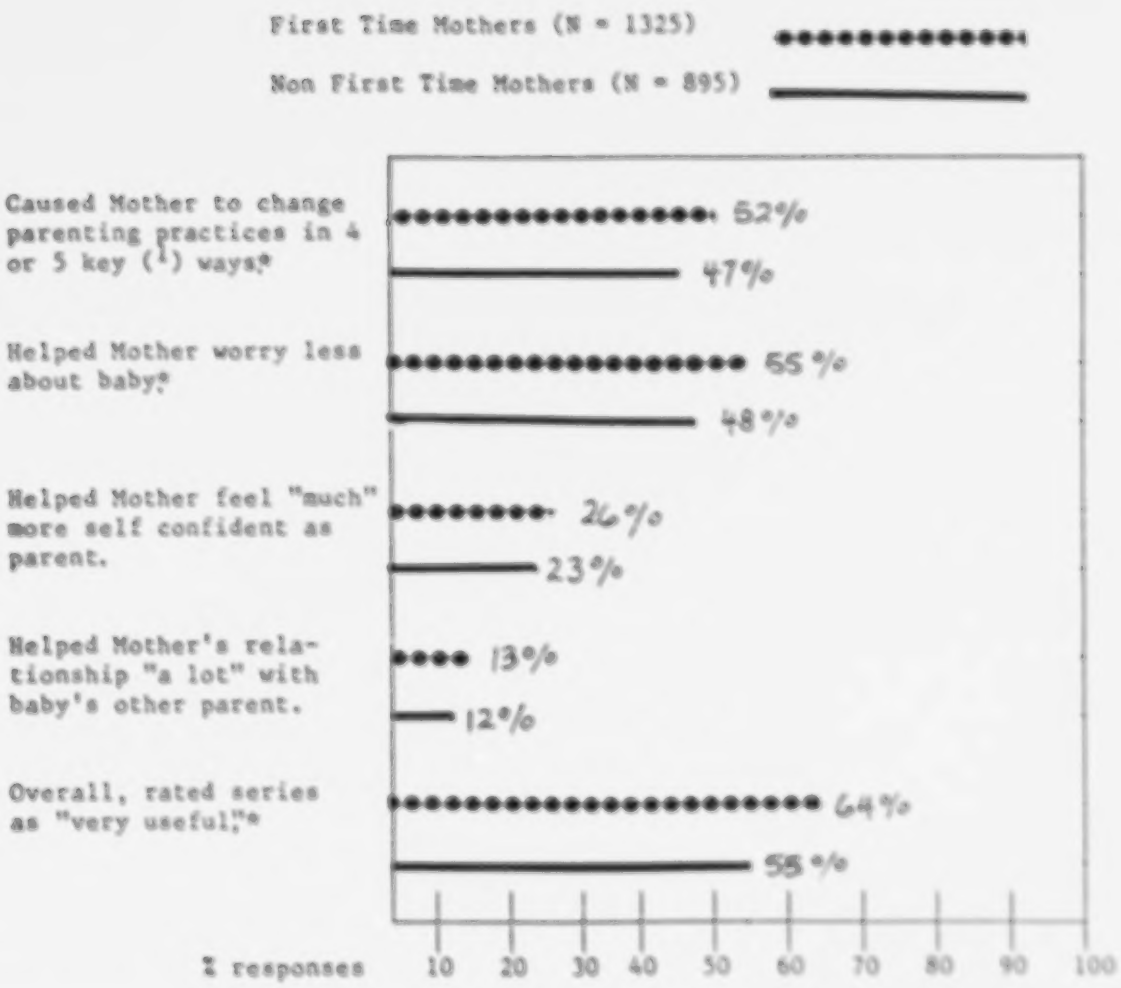
Impact of Home Learning Programs: Black & Non Black Mothers



*$p < .0005$.

(1) Caused me to: 1) talk to baby more; 2) smile, kiss and hug baby more; 3) play with baby more; 4) respond more quickly when baby cried; 5) provide more things for baby to feel, look at, listen to, smell and taste.

Impact of Home Learning Programs:
First Time & Non First Time Mothers


First Time Mothers (N = 1325)
Non First Time Mothers (N = 895)
Caused Mother to change parenting practices in 4 or 5 key (1) ways*
52%
47%
Helped Mother worry less about baby*
55%
48%
Helped Mother feel "much" more self confident as parent.
26%
23%
Helped Mother's relationship "a lot" with baby's other parent.
13%
12%
Overall, rated series as "very useful"*
64%
58%
% responses
10 20 30 40 50 60 70 80 90 100

*p < .05

(1) Caused me to: 1) talk to baby more; 2) smile, kiss and hug baby more; 3) play with baby more; 4) respond more quickly when baby cried; 5) provide more things for baby to feel, look at, listen to, smell and taste.

Respondent Characteristics

Characteristics	% Responses: Aggregate	% Responses: State Range
Age		
Under 20	6	1 to 13
20-24	23	19 to 35
25-29	36	25 to 47
30 and older	34	9 to 50
Marital Status		
Single	10	3 to 22
Divorced	5	2 to 9
Married	85	69 to 92
Highest Educational Level		
8th Grade or Less	1	0 to 4
Some High School	9	1 to 24
High School Graduation	23	8 to 35
Vocational Training	10	6 to 21
Some College	27	5 to 39
College Degree	14	9 to 23
Postgraduate Work	8	3 to 14
Postgraduate Degree	8	2 to 22
Gross Family Income		
Under $5,000	10	2 to 21
$ 5,000 to $9,999	10	1 to 25
$10,000 to 14,999	12	7 to 17
$15,000 to 19,999	13	8 to 18
$20,000 to 29,999	27	9 to 35
$30,000 or more	28	15 to 46
Employed Outside Home		
Not Employed	54	43 to 62
Employed to 1-20 Hour/Wk	13	8 to 19
Employed more than 20/Wk	33	22 to 43
Racial/Ethnic Identity		
White non-Hispanic	86	73 to 99
Hispanic	3	0 to 10
Black	9	0 to 26
American Indian	1	0 to 4
Asian	9	0 to 3
Living Area		
Urban	50	19 to 68
Rural	50	22 to 80
First Baby		
Yes	60	43 to 76
No	40	24 to 57
Past Use of Cooperative Extension		
Yes	25	11 to 39